



What Social and Emotional Learning Advocates Can Learn from Common Core

By Michael Q. McShane

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Key Points

- Advocates of social and emotional learning (SEL) can learn much from the travails that bedeviled Common Core.
- A close look at Common Core offers a number of telling parallels that SEL proponents would be wise to study.
- Specifically, advocates should take care to define what they mean by SEL, relentlessly focus on doing it well, and welcome constructive criticism while carefully scrutinizing bandwagon-jumping frauds.

Vern Law, a pitcher for the Pittsburgh Pirates in the 1950s and 1960s, is known for saying that “experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward.”

In recent years, advocates have begun promoting explicit social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction in schools. This means formally promoting skills such as self-awareness, self-discipline, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.¹

SEL advocates have picked a ripe time to rethink our schools’ priorities. A 2016 survey conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning found that educators across the country want schools to actively promote SEL.² This desire from educators to teach more nonacademic skills is fusing with a general perception that schools have been too focused on narrow math and reading test preparation in recent years. In the 2015 *Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup* poll, 64 percent of Americans surveyed said there was too much emphasis on standardized testing.³

This effort has received broad support. The National Education Association argued that “social and emotional skills are critical to being a good

student, citizen, and worker.”⁴ The Aspen Institute’s National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development declared, “Now is the time to move beyond debate as to whether schools should address students’ social and emotional learning to focus, instead, on how schools can effectively integrate social, emotional, and academic development into their daily work with students.”⁵ The 2018 ExcelinEd conference (a yearly gathering of education reformers from across the country) featured a panel on integrating social and emotional learning and academic development that promised to present “examples of how state and district policies can integrate social emotional learning and academic development.”⁶

SEL has received glowing support from both education reformers and traditional education interest groups, and broad bipartisan organizations have come out in favor of it. Does this sound familiar to anyone?

If echoes of Common Core are ringing in your ears, you are not alone. Remember, both major teachers unions supported Common Core at its outset, only to sour on the endeavor later. It was the National Governors Association (NGA) and

the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) that spearheaded the push for Common Core standards, much like the Aspen Institute's commission is doing now. The parallels go on.

It's fair to say that the implementation of Common Core did not live up to advocates' expectations. Paul Peterson and the pollsters at *Education Next* summed up the trajectory of the initiative back in 2016.

In 2016, 50 percent of all those taking a side say they support the use of the Common Core standards in their state, down from 58 percent in 2015 and from 83 percent in 2013. Republican backing has plummeted from 82 percent in 2013 to 39 percent in 2016. The slip among Democrats is from 86 percent to 60 percent over this time period. Eighty-seven percent of teachers supported the initiative in 2013, but that fell to 54 percent in 2014 and to 44 percent in 2015, stabilizing at that level in 2016.⁷

Republicans, Democrats, teachers, and the general public all soured on the Common Core in a few short years. If SEL advocates do not wish to see their efforts meet the same fate, there are lessons that they can learn from Common Core. Experience is a hard teacher, but it can impart important information.

For those who don't remember the ins and outs of Common Core, let's start with a quick overview. After that, I'll tease out some of the most pertinent lessons.

A Brief History of Common Core

While the idea of common, national standards had percolated in the American education system for years, the actual Common Core effort traces its origins to *Benchmarking for Success*, a 2008 report by the NGA and CCSSO. The first "action" proposed in that document was to "upgrade state standards by adopting a common core of internationally benchmarked standards in math and language arts for grades K-12."⁸ The NGA and CCSSO, along with outside experts, drafted the standards in mid-2009, solicited feedback in late 2009 and early 2010, and released the final standards in June 2010.⁹

At the same time the standards were being drafted and revised, the federal Department of Education launched the Race to the Top program. Race to the Top was a \$4.35 billion competitive grant program for states, and its details were announced in November 2009. States were evaluated on a rubric that gave points to states that "demonstrated [their] commitment to adopting a common set of high quality standards" and were rewarded if they showed they were part of "a consortium of States that a) is working toward jointly developing and adopting a common set of K-12 standards . . . that are supported by evidence that they are internationally benchmarked and build toward college and career readiness by the time of high school graduation; and b) includes a significant number of States."¹⁰

This turbocharged the adoption of the standards while they were still being finalized. According to the Common Core website, Kentucky adopted the standards on February 10, 2010, four months before the official draft was released. West Virginia adopted the standards on June 2, 2010, the day the finalized standards were released. North Carolina adopted the standards the next day.¹¹ By early September 2010, 35 states had adopted Common Core. Four more states would join by the end of the year, and another five would adopt them in 2011.

But it wasn't just standards. New Common Core-aligned assessments were developed too. The federal government provided funding for two consortia of assessments, the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC).

When Secretary of Education Arne Duncan announced the \$160 million and \$170 million grants, respectively, to each organization on September 2, 2010, he touted 26 member states in PARCC and 31 member states in SBAC. In that same speech, he set a pretty high bar for these two tests. He said they would "be an absolute game-changer in public education," "make widespread use of smart technology," and "provide students with realistic, complex performance tasks, immediate feedback, computer adaptive testing, and incorporate accommodations for a range of students."¹² He harped on new testing technology that would allow students

“to design products or experiments, to manipulate parameters, run tests, and record data.”¹³ He said tests would be able to “incorporate audio and video” and situate problems “in real-world environments, where students perform tasks or include multi-stage scenarios and extended essays.”¹⁴

Neither the standards nor their assessments lived up to advocates’ hopes or promises. As the standards started to be implemented, parents and teachers became frustrated. In addition to tanking public opinion, by the 2016–17 school year, only 20 states were using an SBAC or PARCC test.¹⁵ Eight states dropped out of the endeavor entirely.

If one quotation sums this up, it would probably be Secretary Duncan’s remarks to American Society of News Editors at their annual convention in 2013. He opened with these words:

Traditionally, this event has been an opportunity for federal leaders to talk about touchy subjects. For example, you asked President Kennedy to talk about the Bay of Pigs. So, thanks for having me here to talk about the Common Core State Standards.¹⁶

Lessons

For those who would like the effort to promote SEL to go more smoothly and successfully than Common Core, there are some lessons to be learned here. I’d like to highlight four.

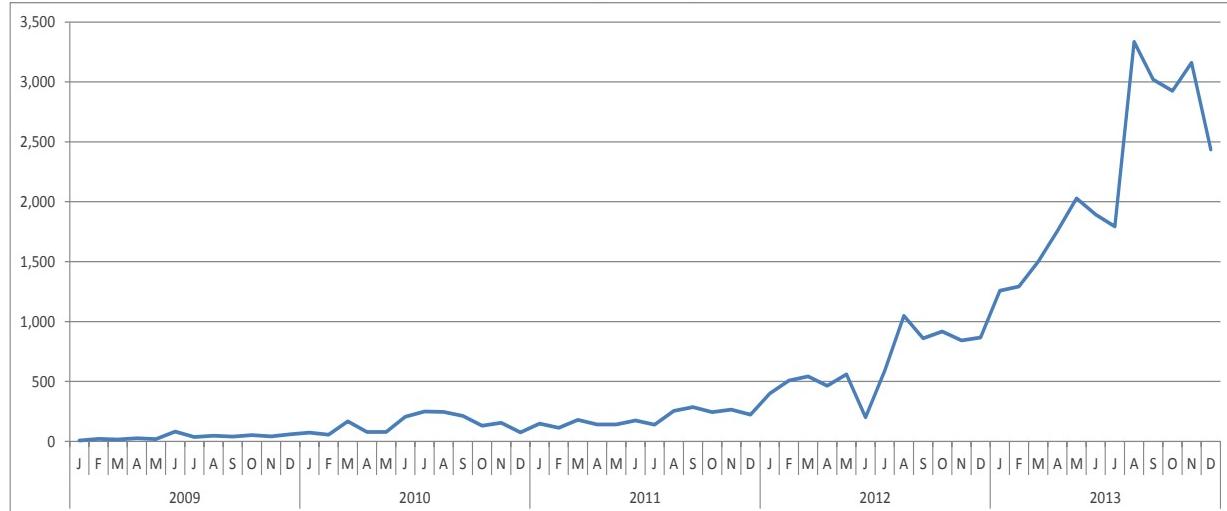
First lesson: Advocates should first define what they mean by SEL; then they should focus on convincing stakeholders that it is worth supporting. Common Core was adopted by almost every state in America without the citizens of those states even realizing that it was happening. In the 2013 *Phi Delta Kappan*/Gallup poll, 69 percent of Americans and 55 percent of public school parents had never heard of the standards.¹⁷

Common Core meant different things to different people. Some saw it as a vindication of progressive pedagogy. Others saw it as a win for traditionalists who argue there is a “core” set of knowledge that all students should possess. Before these serious differences were reconciled, the effort had already spread like wildfire. This came back to haunt supporters when teachers and parents were confused by the effort and turned against it.

In a 2014 AEI report, Frederick Hess and I compiled media mentions of Common Core via a series of LexisNexis searches and documented just how under the radar the entire effort was.¹⁸ Figure 1 is reprinted from that report and shows a month-by-month tracker of articles that mention Common Core.

To give some comparison, we compared coverage of Common Core to that of another controversial topic: school vouchers. We found that “the combined coverage of the Common Core in 2009, 2010, and 2011 was still less than the coverage of vouchers in 1999 alone.”¹⁹ In 1999, around 30,000

Figure 1. Common Core References in Articles, by Month, 2009–13



Note: In the 2014 report, Frederick Hess and I did a LexisNexis search by month: term “Common Core” and category “US Publications.” Source: Frederick M. Hess and Michael Q. McShane, “Flying Under the Radar? Analyzing Common Core Media Coverage,” American Enterprise Institute, March 31, 2014, <http://www.aei.org/publication/flying-under-the-radar-analyzing-common-core-media-coverage/>.

students across the country used a school voucher. By the end of 2011, more than 40 million students lived in a state that had adopted Common Core.

In fact, Common Core saw little coverage until back-to-school time in 2012, when new Common Core-aligned lessons started to get rolled out. That is also when the backlash started.

This is an important lesson. If you are advocating for a major shift in the priorities of the education system, a stealth strategy does not work. As Hess wrote in *National Affairs* in 2014:

Advocates believed that their handiwork was good and right, but they didn't trust the public's judgment or their own ability to sway potential skeptics. So they opted for a stealth adoption, powerfully abetted by the federal government, with whispered reassurances that their ambitious effort really was just technocratic tinkering and wasn't that significant after all. But it turns out, of course, that the implications are much bigger and less certain than initially advertised.²⁰

In many places, state boards of education instituted Common Core without a lot of discussion or debate. It's hard to debate the standards when the final draft hasn't been released. The Common Core effort did not build goodwill among parents and citizens, so when the first lessons started to be made public and folks didn't like them, there was no well of goodwill to draw from. No one had been convinced that this shift was a good idea or worth the hassle, so folks rebelled.

SEL advocates need to learn from this and focus their efforts first on defining what SEL is and then on developing a shared understanding of the enterprise. They need to wrestle with the tough questions. What does SEL mean? What is this effort all about? You can't convince someone to support something if you don't know what it is. Or, at least, you cannot create a durable coalition to support it. It is only after they work to define what it is they are trying to do that they can spread out and start garnering support.

Do parents, teachers, and local citizens have a good idea of what SEL is, why it is important, and how it might shape instruction in their communities' schools? If not, after coming up with a definition that is shared across the coalition, advocates

should think about spreading the word. They should also convince those on the ground in schools and those most intimately connected to them why the effort is important and how it will improve children's lives, schools' functions, and communities themselves. When the policy follows the education effort (not the other way around), advocates maximize the likelihood of their success.

So what does this look like? SEL advocates need to ask themselves a hard question: "When we are going to a state or district to try and get them to emphasize SEL, are we trying to meet as many or as few people as possible?" In other words, are they just trying to convince the key decision makers that can make policies for a whole state, or are they really trying to engage with parents, teachers, state and local representatives, school board members, council members, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, NAACP and Urban League chapters, and the host of small "r" republican organizations that make up the tapestry of American civic life?

Now, this second strategy is much harder. It is more expensive. It is more time-consuming. It is more uncertain. But it is also the only way to create a real, lasting, durable coalition of support for an initiative. Take the time to educate people about why SEL is important and how it will make their children better, happier, and more successful people. Those people become advocates for your cause.

Second lesson: SEL advocates need to work with state and local education agencies to develop the capacity to implement sound SEL instruction. When Secretary Duncan talked about the transformative technology of the next generation of assessments, that transformative technology did not exist yet. Or it at least did not exist at the scale necessary to use in tens of millions of assessments across the country. It still doesn't.

The same was true for instructional materials aligned to the new standards. In a presentation to the Education Writers Association in 2014, both William Schmidt of Michigan State University and Morgan Polikoff of the University of Southern California found that textbooks purportedly aligned to the Common Core were not—and they were, in some cases, close to identical to their pre-Common Core versions.²¹

The same was true for the ability to integrate these new standards into other initiatives that states were undertaking at this time. In 2015, Amanda Fairbanks of the *Hechinger Report* published an in-depth story of teacher evaluation reform and Common Core stepping on each other's toes. She captured the opinion at the time that the "one-two punch of Common Core and new test-based accountability systems is too much to handle and leaves teachers—and students—overwhelmed."²²

All these problems can be summed up by one word: *capacity*. Federal incentives and the desire for scale caused many states that had no ability to successfully implement Common Core to try to implement them. They were not ready to meet the technology needs that the new testing required, they did not have the procurement processes to get aligned materials, and they were not ready to develop either current or preservice teachers to teach the standards.

In fact, it was the goofy stuff that many of those states did that colored the entire federal effort. Folks in states that did have their act together were seeing Facebook posts about terrible homework worksheets or bad test questions in other states, but they thought it applied to them because it all had the "Common Core" label.

It would do SEL advocates zero good to have states try to implement SEL before they are ready. Here are some questions they need to ask themselves.

- **Making Room.** Is there space in the curriculum and schedule for teachers to teach SEL? If something has to go to make room for explicit SEL instruction, what is it? Are we ready to discuss the trade-offs?
- **Preparing Teachers.** What do we know about SEL pedagogy? Is there agreement on ways to teach SEL? Have teacher preparation programs started preparing teachers? Is there professional development in the pipeline to get existing teachers up to speed?
- **Finding Resources.** Are there appropriate SEL instructional materials? Are there ways of measuring textbook alignment to SEL standards? Are there researchers inter-

ested in measuring this? Are there organizations willing to conduct and disseminate this research?

- **Working with Policy.** Where does SEL rank in the priorities that the state, district, or school are currently pursuing? Will SEL enhance those efforts? Complicate them? Get in their way?

There is a terrible tendency to always do more, to add one more thing. No rain drop ever thinks it is responsible for the flood. But states, districts, and schools need to take a hard look at the prosaic details and make sure they have the capacity to execute them well.

Third lesson: SEL advocates need to be aware, and wary, of all the types of folks who will try to join the SEL movement once it gains popularity. Common Core was a windfall for cranks, charlatans, and con artists. Because there was so little infrastructure or an organization that "owned" the standards, folks were pretty much free to say that things were part of Common Core, even if the original authors would want nothing to do with them. Nature abhors a vacuum. Everyone from publishers to bloggers rushed in and got money and clicks.

But in response to some of the more outlandish claims against Common Core, many supporters overcorrected, tarring anyone who questioned the effort with the same broad brush. This turned skeptics into opponents and galvanized those trying to stop the effort.

I'd argue that the various individuals and organizations that will be drawn to the SEL movement can be placed on a continuum from helpful to unhelpful. The challenge for supporters is to clearly delineate who is and is not part of their coalition and whom they should and should not listen to and learn from. Figure 2 illustrates this continuum.

The left end of the continuum is the base of SEL support. This is populated by the researchers, teachers, administrators, and others who have been pushing for SEL for some time and both understand and buy into the endeavor. Generally speaking, they share a definition of SEL, have read the same research, and envision the project in the same way.

Figure 2. Continuum of Movement Members



Source: Author.

Just outside the base of support are the movement’s “critical friends.” These are individuals who support the idea, at least in theory, but have questions about implementation, want clarification about details, or are worried that the effort is going too fast and making mistakes. It is essential that any movement cultivate a set of critical friends. Groupthink is a terrible problem in education policy, particularly when a small number of funders support a large number of organizations. Folks don’t want to step out of line and risk falling out of the good graces of consensus opinion. SEL advocates should welcome questions about implementation, take them seriously, and come up with good answers. Good answers are not just talking points that win a rhetorical skirmish; they are solutions that actually address the underlying issue.

Critical friends, especially good ones, can be annoying. It can be easier to wave your hands at tough questions when making important decisions, especially when a movement has momentum. But those decisions will come back to haunt you, and the pitfalls could have been avoided.

In an example of how not to handle critics, we can return to the same speech from Arne Duncan quoted above. In decrying the “fringe,” “misguided,” and “misinformed” skeptics, he gave no indication that anything any skeptic might have to say might have merit.²³ He dumped all critics, serious and unserious, into the looney bin and casted them as outside the political mainstream and outside polite society. The aggression was unhelpful. It was also a recipe for turning critical friends into frustrated, hostile critics.

Sitting further along the spectrum are skeptics. These folks don’t share in critical friends’ optimism or underlying agreement with the broad strokes of the initiative. They might be educators who are burned out from reform after reform that have burst onto the scene with a bang but petered

out with a whimper. They might be educators who have their own priorities and worry that SEL will bump what they value off the curriculum or the calendar. They might be researchers who are not convinced by the evidence to date and believe that there are other, better interventions that should be tried instead. They might be advocates or commentators that don’t share the same ideological vision of what SEL looks like or whether schools are in the position to teach them well—or at all.

It is somewhere in this region that SEL advocates have to draw a line in the sand and say that everything to the left is part of the coalition and everything to the right is not. Some skeptics’ concerns can be accommodated, and they can be won over. Other skeptics simply disagree too much on first principles. But let’s be clear: Not supporting something and actively opposing it are two different things. How skeptics are treated will determine which of those two camps they fall into. Do they feel like their concerns were listened to? Were their concerns taken seriously? Were they treated with respect? Or were they dismissed, disrespected, and talking-pointed to death?

Beyond the skeptics are the wedgers. Wedgers try to force their idea or product into bigger, more successful movements. Picture the old textbooks with new “Common Core-aligned” stickers on them or the curricula with minor wording changes that suddenly “supported the Common Core.” While wedgers want you to think that they’re part of your movement, you do not want to let them in. They water down your brand, confuse your supporters, and risk sullying your whole endeavor with their individual mistakes. SEL advocates must make bright-line distinctions about what is and is not aligned to their effort. They have to be willing to call out companies or organizations that are simply retreading the same things that they have

been pushing to try to get in on the SEL action. It's not fun, but it is necessary.

Finally come the con artists and nutjobs. Any time big change is afoot and money is on the line, bad actors will be drawn like moths to a flame. In 2019, when the internet has a community for every conspiracy theory and ideological subcategory, folks will make crazy claims about the effort, and some will even gain purchase outside of those niche corners. Common Core had similar controversies in spades. Cranks alleged it was going to track the biomedical data of students. They claimed it was part of a United Nations plot to take over America. The list goes on. SEL advocates need to address this head-on, and they particularly need to call out skeptics and supporters who choose to ally themselves with these folks for political expediency.

This simple rule applies to advocates and skeptics: If they are going to be treated with respect, they have an obligation to act respectfully. This isn't about linen tablecloth manners. It's about the fact that doing Common Core or SEL well is tough and you can only do it well if there is honest, open conversation about what is and isn't working. That requires skeptics and supporters to talk candidly and actually hear one another.

Fourth lesson: SEL advocates should be careful about how SEL is branded. A brand is a blessing and a curse. In another quotation (and for what it's worth, probably an apocryphal one), Yogi Berra said, "In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is."

Everything in education has to move from theory to practice and from vague and idealistic to concrete and practical. Inevitably, some of the lofty goals will have to be hemmed in, and some of the promises will be unfulfilled. 'Twas ever thus.

This is when branding an effort can be helpful and harmful. Common Core became a well-identified brand, which was a helpful shorthand for a complicated endeavor. It helped rally supporters and served as an identifiable package for policymakers. But it also became a liability when parents and teachers didn't like the changes that were happening in their schools. They now had a singular target at which to focus their rage: Common Core.

As the *Education Next* poll demonstrated year after year, the name "Common Core" became a drag on the effort, with the effort losing double-digit support when identified with the brand as opposed to its generic description.²⁴ The single brand nationalized local changes and yoked schools' efforts together. When one teacher in one school sent home a dumb worksheet that claimed to reflect Common Core, every school had to answer for it.

There are a couple of potential ways to heed this cautionary tale. Advocates can choose to be stingy with the SEL brand. The base of the movement can have high standards for what is recognized as aligned to SEL standards, have a few organizations that are entrusted with the SEL imprimatur, and be willing to call out bad or poorly aligned materials. This ensures bright lines and less confusion. But it also centralizes power and entrusts a small number of people to be right consistently. In our diffuse and decentralized system, this can lead to problems.

Another potential path is to be less stingy with the brand and to in fact encourage renaming, remixing, and refining. Rather than encourage the use of SEL over and over again, let schools and districts call their efforts whatever they want to. This is what several states that wanted to keep the core (pardon the pun) of Common Core eventually did. They rebranded the effort with a local spin and a local flavor, disentangling it from the national brand. SEL advocates could allow this from the beginning and articulate SEL as a set of broad principles that lots of different groups can share and put their own twist on.

Advocates have hard decisions on this front but lots of experience from which to draw.

Conclusion

These four lessons should not be surprising. Countless educational interventions have looked great on the drawing board, only to stumble when they come to life. Common Core was unique in the enormous scale, speed, and spread of the standards, as well as the subsequent backlash. What seems like a roaring victory quickly turned into a defeat, or perhaps more of a stalemate.

There are no magic words that SEL advocates can use to advance their cause. There is no blueprint. There is no playbook. But there *is* real and

meaningful engagement with both the people who will be implementing SEL and those whose children will be learning it. There is capacity building at all levels of educational governance and delivery.

And, perhaps most challenging, there is coalition management. Much of this will be tiresome, thankless work. But if SEL is worth doing, it is a necessary and worthwhile effort.

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